



Paws 4 Life

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FOSTER CARE HANDBOOK

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Introduction

Welcome to the Paws 4 Life Foster Care Program!

Cats and kittens make their way to Paws 4 Life for many reasons. Some are stray, some are abandoned, others have been part of a trapping project, or they're simply unwanted by their owners. Every year, we see in excess of 1000 animals come through our doors needing help of some sort.

Many of the animals that come into our care are not able to be adopted into their new 'forever homes' straight away. They may be too young, unwell, or they may need rehabilitation. Space in the shelter is extremely limited and cats and kittens do better when they've been in a loving family environment prior to being adopted. That's where our amazing foster families come in!

The information in this handbook will help you to care for your foster cats and kittens. We hope that you'll keep it handy and refer to it as needed.

Thank you for commitment, we simply couldn't do it without you!

Is Fostering Right For You?

There are many things to consider before fostering. Foster carers must:

- Be at least 18 years old, or have the full support of their guardians.
- Complete and sign a Foster Care Agreement, or have their guardians do it.
- Have their landlord or property manager's permission to foster if the home is rented.
- Have reliable transport and be able to bring their foster animals into Paws 4 Life on a fortnightly basis for scheduled check-ups.
- Let Paws 4 Life know if you, or a member of your household, are pregnant or immunocompromised
- Be able to keep foster animals separated from existing pets within the home (e.g. in the bathroom or a spare bedroom), at least initially.
- Be able to quarantine foster animals to prevent the spread of disease if needed.
- Provide an environment suitable for their foster animals. This will involve ensuring their safety in the home and spending quality time with them for socialisation.
- Keep foster cats and kittens indoors at all times.
- Maintain communication with the Paws 4 Life team.

All members of your household should be on board with fostering. It will involve having destructive furry hurricanes in your home, a lot of poo, and occasionally it will involve heartbreak. Returning animals that your family have fallen in love with to Paws 4 Life is often hard for foster families so this should be taken into consideration prior to fostering.

Additionally, your own cats will need to be up to date with their core vaccinations. If they're not, we can vaccinate your cats at cost for you.

Getting Ready

Before you bring your foster animals home, make sure you've got a suitable space for them to stay. A bathroom or spare bedroom works well.

It's important that cats and kittens have a place in which they feel safe and secure. Choose one room in your house to be a kitten-proofed 'safe space' where they'll be primarily housed. Once they've settled in they can have supervised access to other parts of the house but they should be confined to this room at night and whenever you leave the house.

Your space should:

- Be easy to disinfect with either a non-toxic hospital grade disinfectant or a mild bleach solution. Please note that Dettol products and their residues are toxic to cats.
- Be able to withstand the inevitable mess of babies – toileting mishaps, vomit, spilled water and food, etc. Hard flooring or linoleum laid over top of carpet makes life much easier!
- Be separate from your own pets (at least initially). Kittens have very fragile immune systems, and nursing mothers can be aggressive towards other animals.
- Not be too hot or too cold, and be well secured – no partially open windows!

Supplies

Paws 4 Life will provide all food, litter, a carry cage if needed, and any prescribed medications. Some foster families choose to provide their own food and litter. If that's the case for you, the table below outlines what you'll need.

Dry Food	Wet Food	Litter
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Royal Canin First Age Mother & Babycat (Vet or Pet Store) OR • Iams Proactive Health Healthy Kitten (Pet Store or Supermarket) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Royal Canin Mother & Babycat Ultra-Soft Mousse (Vet or Pet Store) OR • Chef Kitten (pouches) (Supermarket) OR • Chef Kitten (canned) (Supermarket) OR • Smitten Kitten (canned) (Supermarket) <p>NB: Kittens do really on Chef Kitten (canned) but it does make for smelly bums!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plain Clay Litter (Pet Store or Supermarket) OR • Pine Pellets (Bunnings or Mitre 10 as Pellet Fire Fuel) OR • Recycled Paper Litter (Pet Store or Supermarket) <p>NB: Clumping litter is unsafe for kittens and scented litters can be confusing for them.</p>

If you need more food or litter, please ring Jay at least the day before you need them. Unfortunately, Paws 4 Life can't reimburse you if you haven't planned ahead and have to buy supplies.

Equipment And Toys

Equipment like bedding, bowls, litterboxes, toys and scratchers, and crates for foster families are often in short supply. They get damaged or disappear so we recommend that if you are wanting to foster on an ongoing basis that you invest in basic equipment that stays with you. Equipment can be purchased very cheaply at Kmart.

Bedding

Kittens are dirty creatures while they're learning to eat solids and use a litterbox so we recommend having a few beds to cycle through that are easy to wash and dry. Old blankets in a box are perfectly fine. The only requirement is that the bedding is clean and warm.

Bowls And Litterboxes

You'll need a few shallow bowls or dishes - one for water, one for biscuits, and several bowls for wet food. To ensure that all kittens get their fair share of wet food a double sided bowl for every two kittens is best, although a plate or a plastic takeaway container works well too.

You'll need enough litterboxes for the size of the litter that you're fostering so that they've always got somewhere clean to go toilet. Two kittens to a litterbox works well. Relatively shallow, uncovered litterboxes are best and just covering the bottom with litter is adequate. Many litter manufacturers recommend using a lot of litter but we've found this can scare kittens and contribute to inappropriate toileting. As long as they can dig and move litter around, they're happy. Don't forget, you'll need a litter scoop.

Toys And Scratchers

Your foster kittens aren't fussy about toys. Crinkled paper, empty toilet paper rolls and ping pong balls are all exciting things for them. They only requirement is that they're safe – no strings that can get wrapped around legs etc. We do recommend a scratching tower, scratching post or cardboard scratching pad. Scratching is an important and natural behaviour so it's important that they have somewhere appropriate for them to express these needs.

Crates And Playpens

Generally you won't need a crate or playpen but they can be a handy thing to have if you're intending to foster on an ongoing basis. Inexpensive large foldable covered canvas play pens can be purchased at Kmart or most pet stores, and crates can be bought for very little on Trademe. If you're purchasing a crate, look for 42" or bigger to ensure that your kittens have enough room to exhibit natural behaviours while they're contained.

Setting Up And Cleaning Your Kitten Space

You'll want to create distinct zones in your kitten space for sleeping, eating, toileting, and playing. Put down a bowl of water and a bowl of biscuits in one area. These will need to be refilled regularly so that your kittens never run out. It's best to leave a bit of room between the water bowl and any food bowls - this can help to encourage good water intake.

Litterboxes should be away from sleeping and eating areas but still close enough for kittens to get to them quickly. Remember, they've got tiny legs and even tinier bladders. The occasional accident is inevitable but we want appropriate toileting to be easy.

Cleaning will be an ongoing chore. Kittens can be dirty little critters so you'll get through a surprising amount of bedding, their water bowl will need to be washed and refilled regularly, and wet food bowls will need to be washed in hot soapy water daily.

Urine spots and faeces will need to be removed from the litterboxes a couple of times a day. Dirty litterboxes encourage inappropriate toileting behaviour. We find it easiest spot clean litterboxes throughout the day and provide a fresh one in the morning. Old dirty litterboxes are cleaned in hot soapy water and left to dry in the sun until they're needed again.

Take note of what your kittens are leaving in the litterbox. Diarrhoea can indicate a health problem that needs to be dealt with swiftly, as can blood or mucous in the stools.

Kitty Care

Once you've set up your space and collected your foster animals from Paws 4 Life, it's time to settle them in. Moving can be stressful, think of it as having your whole world change. It's important that your kittens (and their mum if they have one) are allowed to settle in at their own pace. Sometimes this means just leaving them alone for a while.

Mums With Litters

Until they're around four weeks old, Mum will do everything for her kittens – feeding, cleaning, and toileting. Until kittens are showing an interest in mum's food, all you have to do is feed her like a teenage boy and she'll take care of the rest (if she doesn't, there's a problem and you'll need to contact us). It's important that mum always has free access to water and biscuits, and that she has several wet food meals a day. Feeding babies burns a lot of calories.

Interactions with the kittens at this point should be short and it's important that mum doesn't get upset. She may be protective of her babies so if she's exhibiting stressed behaviours like hissing, scratching or threatening to bite, it's best to back off and leave her be for a while.

At around 3 weeks old, kittens start to develop their personality and want to explore their world. You can start playing with them more at this point. Lots of pats and you can introduce toys.

At around 4 weeks of age kittens will start to nibble on mum's wet food (and litter, and everything else they can chew on). Allow them to taste and experiment with the solid food. They may walk through it or play in it. This is totally normal and eventually they'll start eating it.

Kittens will generally start to nibble on biscuits at around 5 weeks old and you can dampen them slightly to help.

Around the same time that they're taking an interest in food, kittens will also start going to the toilet by themselves. It's a good idea to pop them in the litterbox after a meal, or after you've played with them. Leaving a little bit of mum's urine in a corner of the litterbox can help kittens figure out what they're doing.

Mum will start weaning her kittens as they become more independent. By 8 weeks old they should be eating mostly solids and nursing only occasionally. Paws 4 Life doesn't force wean kittens unless it's absolutely necessary, mum will do it in her own time.

Possible Issues With Mum Cats

Maternal Neglect – In some cases, cats will neglect or reject their kittens. There are a few causes of this. Stress or a lack of maternal instincts are factors, and in other cases it's because the kittens are sick or weak. If you notice any signs of maternal neglect such as mum not feeding or grooming her kittens, or the kittens are crying a lot, you'll need to contact Paws 4 Life immediately so that we can intervene. If left, those kittens will die.

Maternal Aggression – It's not unusual for nursing mums to behave aggressively sometimes. Her hormones are all over the place and she's got babies to protect. Try and keep her environment as stress free as possible and limit the handling of kittens until she's more relaxed. If aggression becomes severe, or mum is moving her kittens a lot in an attempt to hide them, please contact Paws 4 Life.

Weaned Kittens

Many of the kittens that come into Paws 4 Life have been force weaned too early. Kittens under four weeks old go to specialised foster homes for hand rearing. If they are older than four weeks and are eating solid food they are generally fine being in a normal foster home, though they'll need a little more attention from their foster parents for a while.

It's important that these sorts of kittens are kept well hydrated – they'll often need supplementing with formula or pet milk from a bowl, and food intake must be closely monitored to ensure that the kittens are growing. Sometimes their wet food will need to be mixed with water to make a thick soup that they can eat easier. It can be gradually thickened up when they're eating more confidently. We aim for a 75-100gm weight gain per week. The key is to feed lots of small meals.

Kittens who have been weaned too early will sometimes need help figuring out how to groom themselves. Brushing them gently with a soft toothbrush can help stimulate grooming behaviours. They'll also need help with learning to use the litterbox. It's a good idea to pop them in the litterbox after a meal, or after you've played with them. Dirty bottoms can be cleaned with a fragrance free baby wipe. If your foster kittens are exceptionally filthy, please ring Paws 4 Life and we can talk you through safely washing and blow-drying them.

Kittens who have been weaned at a more appropriate age (eight weeks onwards) are easier. They'll most likely be eating and using the litterbox confidently. In this case, your main priority is socialisation. We want our kittens to love people and be happy with whatever is going on around them. Lots of cuddles and playtime is important.

Sick Kittens

If you've signed up to foster sick kittens, it's important to keep in contact with Paws 4 Life and to stick with the appropriate medication and care regime. Know your kittens' health baseline and if their condition worsens, please contact Paws 4 Life to schedule a check-up. Sick kittens, especially those with cat flu, often have no appetite or can't smell their food so they won't eat. Kittens who don't eat get dehydrated and if not attended to quickly, they die. Heating food slightly can help with inappetence. If your kittens have not eaten or drunk for more than 12 hours, or have lost weight two days in a row, or are lethargic, they'll need to be seen immediately by Paws 4 Life.

Daily Health Checks

It's important to check your kittens over daily and make note of any possible brewing health issues. If you're at all worried, please contact Paws 4 Life. We love pedantic foster families! When checking over your kittens, consider the following:

- Are your kittens active and full of energy?
- Are they eating well and gaining weight?
- Are they withdrawing from human contact or hiding?
- Are their bottoms clean?
- Are there any loose stools or diarrhoea in the litterbox?
- Are their eyes and noses clear of discharge?
- Are your kittens sneezing or coughing?
- Are there any signs of hair loss, lesions, or scaly skin?

See Section XX: Health for more information about signs of illness in kittens.

Socialisation And Training

For a kitten to develop into a friendly and loving pet as an adult, they must be regularly handled and exposed to a variety of different people, noises and experiences while they're young. This is known as socialisation and is an important part of growing up.

Body Handling

It's important that kittens are handled often. Handling is a good chance to check for any lumps and bumps, lesions or injuries, and regular handling will make kittens less defensive about different areas of their bodies being touched in the future. Tickle their bellies, scratch in between their toes and touch their ears and lips. Kittens find all of these things fun when they're young and it will help make future experiences which are less fun (like vets) easier. Kittens under three weeks old should only be handled while mum is nearby, and if she seems stressed, it's time to stop the session. Kittens must be handled very gently at this age and only for short periods.

New People And Experiences

It's a good idea to expose kittens to normal household noises as much as possible without traumatising them. Vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, the TV, children playing – these are all beneficial experiences for kittens and help them to become more confident.

Whenever possible, kittens should meet a variety of different people. If you've got guests, let them play with the kittens, making sure that children are supervised.

Don't feel that your kittens must be contained to the one room at all times. As long as you're able to supervise them, they can be allowed to explore the house. If they've got a mum with them, this'll give her a much needed break and will also help the kittens to form a positive association with novel experiences and new environments. Exploring their world is fun!

Toilet Training

Kittens will start being able to toilet by themselves at around 3 – 4 weeks of age. Accidents are inevitable but it's important to always encourage kittens to use the litterbox. It's a good idea to pop kittens in the litterbox after they've eaten, or after they've played. Leaving a little of their mum's urine in one corner of the litterbox can help them to work out what they're doing. Don't force them to stay in the litterbox if they're not ready.

If you're having problems toilet training kittens, try:

- Cleaning litterboxes on a more regular basis. A clean litterbox encourages good toileting behaviours.
- If kittens are having accidents on a regular basis, try putting litterboxes in any problematic areas after cleaning that spot thoroughly with a product that destroys odours.
- Keep kittens confined to a smaller area. Tiny legs and tiny bladders can make getting to the litterbox in time problematic.

If you are struggling, please reach out to the Paws 4 Life team, there's nothing that we haven't encountered before.

Shy And Timid Kittens

A normal, well socialised kitten will be confident, curious and enjoy being handled. Some kittens will be shy. Shyness can be genetic, learned, or from a lack of prior socialisation. Shy kittens benefit from more confinement (if their world gets too big too soon it can make them more frightened), and multiple short handling sessions daily. We recommend lots of hand treating treats or stinky food to form a positive association with human interaction, and a radio at a low volume can help habituate a shy kitten to voices and other noises. If you want to be really fancy, there is music specifically for calming cats available on Youtube and Spotify.

When dealing with shy kittens there are a few things to remember:

- Multiple short socialisation sessions are best. Thirty seconds of a positive human interaction is better than a longer session where the kitten reaches its stress threshold and tries to escape.
- Sustained eye contact can be seen as aggressive.
- Hand feeding and gentle brushing can work wonders.
- Dangly toys that the kitten wants to 'hunt' can allow you to have a positive interaction with a shy kitten without invading their space.
- Make sure that there are no inaccessible hiding spaces for the kitten. A hiding spot (a carrier with the door taken off works well) so the kitten feels safe is a good idea, but you must be able to easily access them to make any progress.

If you are struggling, please reach out to the Paws 4 Life team. We socialise a lot of wild and unfriendly kittens so we've got plenty of tricks up our sleeves.

NB: If your normally confident kitten becomes shy or starts to hide, this could be a sign of illness or injury.

Appropriate Play

It's important to never play rough games with kittens, or encourage them to bite at feet or fingers and allow them to climb legs. What is cute but naughty behaviour in a five week old kitten is unacceptable behaviour when they're older, and can mean that that they'll have a much harder time finding a home, or staying in one.

The best way to handle most undesirable behaviours is to prevent them in the first place. Kittens are curious and playful in nature, and they naturally want to explore and test their environment, and boundaries too. Give them a variety of toys, and let them play as much as they want but if they show undesirable behaviours like climbing legs or biting make sure to consistently redirect their attention towards more appropriate play.

If your kittens bite, or climb your legs, immediately remove them and redirect their attention. If they persist in rough play, leave the room and let them settle.

Furniture Scratching And Curtain Climbing

Scratching and climbing are normal behaviour for cats. They scratch to wear down their claws and scent mark their territory. Kittens will also climb furniture and curtains as part of exploring their world and to get closer to people. Obviously, we don't want kittens destroying furniture so it's important that they are provided with somewhere that is appropriate to scratch and climb such as a scratching tower, scratching post or cardboard scratching pad. Make it fun and they'll use it.



If kittens are climbing up the sides of your furniture to get closer to you, pick them up before they start to climb. If kittens are climbing curtains, tie them up where they're out of reach (prevention is best), or distract the kittens by putting them on a scratching tower or somewhere appropriate to climb.

Health Checks, Sickness, And Veterinary Care

On admission to Paws 4 Life, cats and kittens are given a standard health check, any issues are noted, they're checked for signs of ringworm, and they are treated for worms and fleas prior to being sent to a foster family.

It's important that Paws 4 Life has a complete history for each animal while in their care. For this reason, we do not allow foster families to seek veterinary care anywhere other than at Paws 4 Life except in the case of an emergency, and we do not let foster families administer worm and flea treatments except where directed to by Paws 4 Life.

Paws 4 Life has a clinic on site and our own veterinarian who is on call 24/7.

Health Checks

Part of fostering for Paws 4 Life is bringing your foster animals into the shelter on a fortnightly basis for health checks. Your kittens will be weighed to ensure that they're growing properly, they'll be wormed, and if needed, they'll be treated for fleas.

If you have very young kittens, we may ask you to give them a three day course of Panacur as their first worm treatment. This is a broad-spectrum liquid wormer given orally every 24 hours and is ideal for small kittens as it is easy for them to swallow and gentle on their stomachs. Kittens are wormed on a fortnightly basis from four weeks of age.

We use Frontline Spray to treat small kittens for fleas as it is very safe and can be used daily if needed. There are some instances where fleas are resistant to Fipronil, the active ingredient in Frontline, so if you still see fleas on your kittens 24 hours after a treatment, please let Paws 4 Life know. Fleas don't seem like a big deal but they can quickly cause a kitten to become anaemic.

Health checks are by appointment. To book, please contact Jay.

General Sickness

Early Signs Of Sickness

Kittens are fragile creatures so it is important to keep a close eye on their health. If you see any of the following signs, please contact Paws 4 Life for help.

- Inappetence – a poor or non-existent appetite
- Excessive thirst
- Failure to gain weight for more than two days in a row
- Stunting – failure to reach age appropriate milestones
- Kittens look 'rough' and unkempt, have a dull coat, or look bloated
- Lethargy – a lack of energy, weakness, or excessive sleepiness
- Vomiting or diarrhoea
- Sneezing, eye or nasal discharge
- Coughing
- Oral ulcers
- Skin lesions
- Lameness
- Change in behaviour – especially if the kitten becomes withdrawn

Emergencies

It is an emergency if you see any of the following, and you will need to contact Paws 4 Life immediately.

- Inappetence for more than twelve hours
- Dehydration
- Apparent pain
- Persistent vomiting or diarrhoea
- Dark urine, or difficulty urinating
- Extreme lethargy
- White gums
- Seizures
- Sustained crying
- Agonal Breathing – gasping or struggling to breathe
- Obvious broken limbs
- Inability to stand or move
- Uncontrollable bleeding

Dehydration

Dehydration in kittens is serious and can kill quickly. If you suspect that your kitten is dehydrated you can test by checking for skin tenting. Take a pinch of skin over the kitten's shoulders and pull up gently. The skin should snap back into place quickly when released. If the skin stays up ('tents') or takes a while to return the normal, the kitten is dehydrated.

If you see any signs of dehydration, please contact Paws 4 Life.

Diarrhoea

There are three types of poo: Normal, Soft, and Diarrhoea. Normal poos are well formed and brown. Soft poos are semi-formed, and Diarrhoea is liquid. With soft poos and diarrhoea, the colour may change or you may see fresh (bright red) blood or mucous in the poo. Sometimes there will be more poo than usual.

Diarrhoea is common in kittens. It can be caused by parasites (worms), viruses, stress, overfeeding, sudden changes in diets or it may have another cause. Ongoing diarrhoea can cause dehydration.

If your kittens are active and happy and have soft poos or diarrhoea for less than 24 hours it's generally not a concern. If they're lethargic, 'off colour' or the diarrhoea is persistent (more than 24 hours), we need to know.



Normal

Firm and well formed. Leaves little or no residue when picked up.



Soft

Semi-Formed – presents as piles or spots. Leaves residue when picked up.



Diarrhoea

Watery, unformed – presents as a puddle.

Giardia

Giardia is a microscopic parasite that causes the illness known as Giardiasis. Giardia is contagious and zoonotic, meaning that it can be passed to other species including humans. It's found on contaminated surfaces, in soil, or in food or water that has been contaminated with infected poo.



Symptoms:

- Diarrhoea (frothy, greasy, bloody, fetid odour)
- Soft stool, excessive mucous, bloody

Ringworm

Despite the name, ringworm is not a worm, it is a skin fungus. Ringworm is very common, especially over the summer months. Ringworm generally isn't harmful but it does require prolonged aggressive systemic treatment. Ringworm is zoonotic, meaning that it can be passed to other species including humans. All animals are checked for signs of ringworm when they come into the shelter using a Woods Lamp. However, this is not always accurate and ringworm has a long incubation period (up to three weeks) before becoming symptomatic.



Symptoms:

- Hair loss - generally on chin, head, ears, forelimbs
- Crusty or Scaly Lesions - generally on chin, head, ears, forelimbs
- Blackheads (chin)

Cat Flu

Cat Flu is the generic term for a condition that can be caused by any one of three viruses – Feline Herpesvirus Type 1 (FHV), Feline Calicivirus (FCV) or Feline Chlamydiosis. Many kittens in New Zealand are born to cats who have had cat flu, and are asymptomatic. Generally, these kittens are fine but they may become sick during a period of stress such as a change of environment, when they're feeling otherwise unwell, at weaning, or after surgery.

If you see any signs of cat flu, please contact Paws 4 Life. Left untreated, cat flu can kill kittens.



Feline Herpesvirus Type 1

Symptoms:

- Upper Respiratory Infection (Sneezing / Snot)
- Conjunctivitis



Feline Calicivirus

Symptoms:

- Drooling
- Oral Ulceration
- Lameness / Limping
- Upper Respiratory Infection (Sneezing / Snot)
- Conjunctivitis



Feline Chlamydiosis

Symptoms:

- Conjunctivitis (eyes will also look 'meaty')
- Upper Respiratory Infection (Sneezing / Snot)

Ear Mites

Ear mites are a fairly common parasite in both cats and dogs. Ear mites live on the skin of the ear canal and feed off ear wax and skin oils.

If you see any signs of ear mites, please contact Paws 4 Life.



Symptoms:

- Itching at ears
- Head shaking
- Presence of 'coffee grounds' like discharge in ear canal
- Odour

